

The Gospel in a Godless State

We received an email forward from friends in Hawaii about government control of the church:

Pastors in China report that they've been forced to integrate (the) President...’s words into the(ir) biblical (messages)...the Chinese Communist Party increasingly pressures church leaders to infuse their sermons with political ideology...

They asked...

Hi Mark, Is this true? I hope you folks are well. Mahalo ke Akua Iesu Cristo pumehana..Imua!

Reply...

Mahalo for your prayers for us here in Beijing and for the Church of China to be faithful amidst all the challenges and pressures we face.

Dayna and I have often told friends who ask, *“If you heard something about China it is probably true, somewhere, sometime!”*

We often get asked by Chinese friends about some strange doings they heard about America, wondering if that is ‘normal’ or ‘everywhere’ in USA? It is often embarrassing to hear about the craziness in our own homeland! There is a lot of stuff going on in a big country! Then multiply USA by 3...there are over a billion people in China.

This is a one-party state. And the party agenda is explicitly atheistic. You would never hear a politician here end a speech with a reference to God or prayer! So those who want to follow Jesus here must be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

My point is MOST Christians around the world have the challenge of navigating faithfulness to the faith within their political context. The evil nature of the State demands ultimate allegiance, which belongs to God alone. False authority has a voracious appetite. It is not easy to walk the tightrope of loyalty to Jesus, here or anywhere. Everyone who follows Him must decide where they will ‘draw the line’ and take a stand.

When you know the State opposes Christ – as we’ve experienced for 23 years in Kazakhstan and China – ‘patriotism’ does not muddy Gospel clarity. When I pastored in Hilo, I took the US flag out of the sanctuary and put it in the closet. All hell broke loose, and I was almost fired immediately! Supporting churches we visit in America around July 4th often go ‘all out’ with flags, banners, people wearing red, white, and blue, singing patriotic ‘hymns’ and sermons about the great USA! The ‘other’ extreme is witnessed in churches that rant against the leaders in power at the time! I remember one man in USA asking me if I talk about the Chinese govt in my sermons here? I told him I preach the text of Scripture for the day. If there is something about authority/government in that passage I would try and apply it faithfully. He lamented, *“I could not imagine being in a church that did not talk about politics every Sunday!”* That is not a good practice, in any country!

When a gov't orders what can and can't be preached, as you cite, faithful preachers need to be wise. That does not always mean telling them off, like we Americans would do! When I was in high school my friend and I got up on the stage on Prom Night during the 'band break' and started to preach Jesus using their microphones. The chaperones quickly shut us down saying, *"You can do that tomorrow in your church, but not here tonight!"* The Church in USA must submit to gov't authority in building codes, fire standards, employee regulations, tax exemptions, and health restrictions. Shall we call that compromise or wisdom?

I find it interesting that Romans 13 commands fear and obedience to the State and Revelation 13 depicts the State as a beast empowered by Satan the dragon. Paul and Peter who write about honoring State rulers were both killed by them – like our Lord Jesus!

At this point the US govt is not closing churches and putting pastors in prison – or to death. But that is happening in many countries. So, in such places we need to factor more issues. Can one stand for the ultimacy of Jesus and the Bible even if you have to offer some level of allegiance to Caesar for you and your people to stay alive? Can you bend and not break? Can you cooperate and not compromise? Can you please Caesar and Christ? Not easy.

So, thanks for praying for us all here.

Yours in Him, Mark

PS I just found and posted a talk I gave in Kampala in 1985 on "Christian Response to Authority" *Explo 1985 Makerere University, Uganda*

http://www.pastormarkblair.org/downloads/Topics/Explo%201985%20Makerere%20University%20Christian%20Response%20to%20Authority%20Mark%20Blair_FINAL.mp3

One of the Ugandan brothers on the speaking team of that event was John Wilson, an oil company executive who was also an evangelist. He was driving home from the conference with his wife and mother in the car. They were stopped at a roadblock and the soldier demanded John give him his nice car. John got out and handed the keys to the soldier. Then the soldier shot John in the head, killing him right before the eyes of his wife and mother! That was the 'normal' of Uganda during our 8 years there.